DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 070 HE 011 409

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TITLE A Study of the Academic Advisement System in a Community College. AIR Forum 1979 Paper.
PUB DATE May 79
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (19th, San Diego, California, May 13-17, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Community Colleges; *Educational Counseling; *Faculty Advisors; Guidance; Higher Education; Institutional Research; *Program Evaluation; Student Characteristics; Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; *Student Teacher Relationship; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum 1979

ABSTRACT

The academic advisement system in a large, comprehensive community college is evaluated. Student and faculty questionnaires were designed to measure perceptions of the processes and outcomes of the advisement system. Findings from 841 student questionnaires are reported and discussed. The survey investigated background variables, process variables, and outcome variables of the advising system. Despite the fact that the background, process, and outcome measures chosen for the study were purely empirical and lacked any theoretical base, the study produced useful information for assessing the efficacy of the advisement system. The most successful predictor of student evaluation of advisors was the number of times the students met with their advisors during a semester. The frequency of their meetings was found to be significantly related to whether they knew the name and location of their advisor, how close their curriculum was to the subject area in which the advisor taught, and how easy they found it to meet with their advisors. The necessity and example of how a large amount of data can be reduced for effective and sharply focussed presentation of key findings is also illustrated in this study. (SF)

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ED174070

THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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HE 011 409

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A Study of the Academic Advisement System in a Community College

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Introduction

An effective academic advisement system is crucial to achieving a match between the needs, abilities and backgrounds of students, and the program of studies they pursue, so that benefits and satisfaction derived by students from their education at institutions of higher education can be optimized. While an effective advisement system is important for all institutions of higher education, it is vital for community colleges because of the nature of students they serve. A large proportion of students entering community colleges are academically underprepared for college work, and are often confused about their career or education goals. As many of these students are first-generation college students, they often fail to find helpful guidance at home in clarifying their educational goals and in selecting an appropriate course of studies to achieve those goals. Barring undependable advice from their friends and peers, their academic advisors in college offer them the most easily accessible and useful source of advice on selecting an appropriate program of studies.

However, not all community colleges can afford large, full-time counseling staff which can devote adequate time and attention to advising students. In many cases, as in the case of the college where this study was conducted, the function of advising students on academic matters is left to the faculty. Often, probably because the faculty do not consider academic advisement as their prime function, they may not invest enough time and attention to it, which may lead to questions about the efficacy of the advisement system and to the necessity of conducting an evaluation of the system.

This paper is based on a study of the advisement system in a large, comprehensive community college. The study was undertaken to evaluate the efficacy of the advisement system, so that, if necessary, appropriate steps could be taken to make it more effective. Given the constraint of working with a College-wide committee, the design of the study was kept simple. The study does not illustrate the use of either some important theoretical constructs, or any complicated statistical procedures. It is a purely empirical study based on student and faculty responses to simple and direct questions on the functioning of the advisement system.

Methodology

In consultation with a committee consisting of students, faculty and administrators, two questionnaires, one for the faculty and the other for the students, were developed. The questionnaires were designed to obtain measures of the background of the faculty and students, and their perceptions of the processes and outcomes of the advisement system. Independent perceptions of the students and faculty were expected to provide the cross-validation of those perceptions. However, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, this paper is based only on the findings on students. The full report including the detailed findings based on both the students and the faculty responses is expected to be available through the ERIC system.

Treating courses as the sampling unit, a proportionate number of course sections was chosen so as to include both freshmen and seniors (second year) students, but at the same time selecting relatively a greater proportion of the senior students who were likely to have had a longer exposure to the advisement system. In the latter part of the Spring, 1978, semester, the student survey questionnaire was administered in the selected classrooms and information on the following questions was obtained from the students.

Background Variables

1. When did they enter the College?
2. The program in which enrolled.

Process Variables

3. Is the advisor and his/her location known?
4. How many times per semester do they meet with their advisor?
5. In case, the students do not see their assigned advisor, from whom do they seek academic advice?
6. How easy have they found it to meet with their advisors?
7. Have they had the same advisor each semester?
8. How many different advisors have they had?
9. Are they enrolled in the same curriculum or division in which their advisor teaches?

Outcome Variables

10. How helpful have they found their academic advisor in:
    - i understanding the objectives of their programs of study
    - ii selection of courses to enroll in
    - iii solving academic problems
    - iv being introduced to various college services and facilities
    - v evaluating their academic progress
11. Overall usefulness of the advisor.
12. Would they like to change their advisor?
13. Would they prefer to choose their own advisor in their senior year?
14. Did they have enough information to select right courses for their first semester?
15. Were they advised correctly regarding entrance requirements for their curriculum?

The data derived from student responses was analyzed mainly through contingency tables, but zero-order and multiple correlations were also used to study the relationships among the key process and outcomes variables.

Study Sample

The responses on the survey questionnaire were received from 873 out of a maximum of 1,200 student who had enrolled in the beginning of the semester in the selected course sections. However, as many of these 1,200 students had withdrawn from these courses by the time the questionnaire was administered, it is hard to compute a reliable response rate from the questionnaire. Thirty-two out of the 873 questionnaires received had to be excluded from the study as the responses were either incomplete or from part-time students. The study is thus based on the responses of 841 students.

In looking at the background of the surveyed student, it was found that 55 percent of the students included in the study had been in the College for three or more semesters, while only 4.4 percent had attended the College for less than a complete semester. About 73 percent of the students who knew their advisors, reported that they were enrolled in the same curriculum in which their advisors taught, while 11.5 percent were enrolled in the same academic division but in a different curriculum, and about 15 percent were enrolled in a different academic division.

Findings

In order to examine the relationships among and between the background, process and outcome variables, a series of contingency tables were generated with the use of a cross-tabulation program. This resulted in more than 70 tables with useful information. It became a challenge then to reduce this inordinate amount of information to manageable proportions, so that the principal findings of the study could be presented in such a way that the decision-makers who had neither the time nor patience to go through all those tables could easily grasp the findings and their implications. This was achieved through a two-step reduction process. First, by combining the key elements of several tables which had some common variables, and by condensing the findings on various process and outcome variables in single tables, eight new tables were created to present the key findings in a summary form. As the final step in this process of data reduction, an outcome and a process rating were generated from the summarized data, which made it easy to bring the key relationships found in the study under a sharp focus. The findings of the study are presented here using some of the eight summary tables.

On analysis of the data, it was found that about 14 percent of the surveyed students did not know either the name or the location of their advisor. However, most of these students did receive academic advice, though not necessarily from their assigned advisor. The perceptions of the usefulness of their advisors by these students and by those who knew their advisors are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Percent of students who found their advisor very or largely useful in different areas of advice.

	Advisor Known	Advisor Not Known
1. Overall	33.7	10.4
2. Understanding program objectives	54.1	36.6
3. Selection of courses	51.9	34.0
4. Solving academic problems	43.8	32.4
5. Introduction to college services and facilities	35.1	28.1
6. Evaluation of academic progress	48.5	34.3

It is obvious that the advisors did not receive a great amount of approval from the students. But it is interesting to note that the students were more negative in their overall assessment of the advisors than in the assessment of the advice received in any of the specific areas. This could mean that students expected more from their advisors than merely advice in the listed areas.

Table 2 presents a comparative evaluation of the advice received by students from their assigned advisors or from five other alternate sources. This table summarizes data from six original tables.

TABLE 2

Percent of students who found their advisor or other sources of advice very or largely useful

	Assigned Advisor	Chair-person	Curric-ulum Teacher	Friend/ Peer	Coun-selors	Someone in Dean's Office
1. Understanding program ob-jectives	55.5	61.9	45.4	52.2	0.0	27.3
2. Selection of courses	54.5	52.4	39.1	39.1	0 0	41.7
3. Solving academic problems	46.3	45.0	37.8	20.0	0.0	30.0
4. Introduction to college services	36.1	31.2	33.3	20.0	14.3	33.3
5. Evaluation of academic progress	48.7	50.0	51.5	25.0	12.5	30.0

In understanding program objectives, the students found the chairperson more useful than their assigned advisor, and they found their teachers and friends quite as useful as the advisor. But, in other areas, while chairpersons proved to be as useful as the assigned advisors, other sources for advice were not found to be as useful.

Table 3 presents the inter-correlations among the important process variables, and between the process variables and the key outcome variable - overall usefulness of the advisor.

TABLE 3

Inter-Correlations

	Advisor Known	# of Times Advisor Met	How easy to Meet Advisor	Overall Usefulness of Advisor
Advisor known				.24
# of times advisor met	.34[1]			.58
How easy to meet advisor	.41	.44		.55
Proximity of advisor's & advisee's curriculum	.28	.30	.30	.24

[1]Negative signs of some of the correlations resulting only due to the way of ordering question options have been eliminated.

In order to identify the key process variables which could successfully explain the outcomes, a regression analysis was run with the overall usefulness of the advisor as the dependent variable, and the process variables as the predictors. Only three of the process variables proved to be significant predictors of the outcome variables, but these three variables could explain nearly half of the variance of the outcome variable. The results are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Results of a multiple correlation analysis using the overall usefulness of advisor as dependent variable.

Independent Variables	R	Amount of additional variance accounted for
1. No. of times advisor met	.583	34%[1]
2. How easy to meet with advisor	.669	10.9%[1]
3. Curriculum	.674	0.6%[2]

[1] $s = .001$ [2] $s = .05$

In order to stress that the varying perceptions by students of the usefulness of the advisement system in different curricular areas were strongly related to their perceptions of the advisement processes in those areas, the student perceptions of the process and outcomes were reduced to an outcome and a process rating for each of the curriculum areas, as shown in Tables 5 and 6. The five curricular areas were then ranked on the basis of these two ratings as shown in Table 7.

TABLE 5

Division	Percent of student who found advisors very or largely useful in their advice on: Program Objectives %	Course Selection %	Academic Problems %	College Services %	Academic Progress %	Overall %	% of Students: Who Had Information to Select Courses %	Advised Correctly on Entrance Requirements %	Student Outcome Rating %
Soc. Sci. & Humanities	32.8	31.9	20.0	20.0	22.2	20.0	44.1	55.3	30.8[1]
Business	49.0	43.8	48.6	34.5	24.6	28.5	65.0	68.0	45.3
Science	40.0	33.3	31.3	17.9	24.5	26.0	48.1	64.6	35.7
Eng. Tech.	50.0	55.1	45.2	22.9	25.4	23.9	60.5	77.9	45.1
Health	72.7	69.9	52.6	50.0	55.0	51.3	76.4	79.2	63.4

[1]Average of the eight percentages in ech row.

TABLE 6

Division	Percent of students responding positively on: Advisor Known	Advisor from Same Curriculum	Advisor Met 3 or More Times	Easy to Meet with Advisor	Student Process Rating
Soc. Sci. & Human.	77.7	56.8	8.0	48.3	37.1[1]
Business	85.1	65.8	11.4	62.7	46.6
Science	98.1	48.0	20.0	61.2	43.1
Eng. Tech.	89.5	98.5	15.0	58.5	57.4
Health	95.9	95.2	41.4	69.7	68.8

[1]Average of the four percentages in each row.

TABLE 7

Division	Student Process Rating (Table 6)	Student Outcome Rating (Table 5)	Ranks Based On: Student Process Rating	Ranks Based On: Student Outcome Rating
Soc. Sci. & Human.	37.7	30.8	5	5
Business	46.6	45.3	3	2
Science	43.1	35.7	4	4
Eng. Tech.	57.4	45.1	2	2
Health	68.8	63.4	1	1

It can be seen that except in the case of the Business Division which is one rank lower on the process rating than the Engineering Technology Division but has the same rank on the outcome rating, the rankings of the curricular areas on the basis of the two ratings corresponded exactly with each other.

Discussion

Despite the fact that the background, process and outcome measures chosen for this study were purely empirical and, lacked any theoretical base, the study produced useful information for assessing the efficacy of the advisement system in the College. The most successful predictor, for example, of the student evaluation of the usefulness of their advisors proved to be simply the number of times that the students met with

their advisors during a semester. However, the relationship between these two variables, probably, worked in both ways. If students found their advisor useful, they tended to meet with him/her more frequently. On the other hand, the more frequently the student saw their advisors, probably, more benefits did they derive from their advice. Moreover, the frequency of their meetings was found to be significantly related to whether they knew the name and location of their advisor, how near was their curriculum to the subject area in which the advisor taught, and how easy did they find it to meet with their advisors.

The study also illustrated the necessity and example of how a large amount of data could be reduced for effective and sharply focussed presentation of the key findings. For example, the derivation and use of the process and outcome ratings, and their application to rank different curricular areas brought out the simple but very useful finding that the perceived outcomes of the advisement system did not depend upon any mysterious process but were strongly related to simple manageable factors such as how often do advisees see their advisors, do they have full information on the location and availability of their advisors, familiarity of the advisors with the curriculum in which their advisees are enrolled, etc.